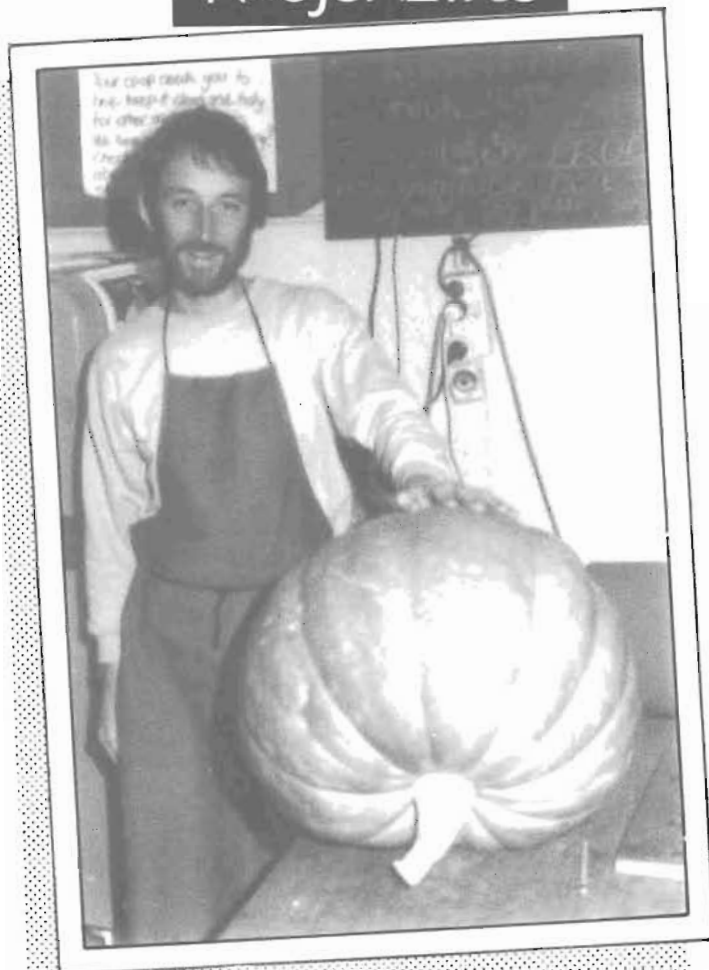


THE CO-OPERATIVE AFFAIRS JOURNAL OF OPERATOR

№8 JUNE 1985



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Distributed by Allbooks, 16 Darghan Street, Glebe, NSW, 2037.

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Mail orders and Victorian outlets are also supplied direct from Sybylla Press, 193 Smith Street, Fitzroy, Vic, 3065

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THE CO-OPERATOR

VICTORIA'S JOURNAL OF CO-OPERATIVE AFFAIRS

The Co-operator is published every month by Gay Publications Co-operative Limited, 87 King William Street, Fitzroy 3065, Victoria. *The Co-operator* welcomes contributions from all sections of the co-operative movement throughout Victoria. Articles should be typed, preferably double-spaced, and should reach *The Co-operator* no later than the last Friday of the month prior to publication. Receipt of articles will be taken by the Editor as constituting permission to publish unless the contrary is specifically indicated. Typescripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. All articles submitted for publication must carry the name and address of the author. Signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of Gay Publications Co-operative. The Editor reserves the right to edit all articles prior to publication.

Editor: Noel Maloney

Assistant Editor: Danny Vadasz

Design and Layout: Lawrence Johnston and Colin Batrouney

Printing: Sybylla Co-Operative Press Ltd.

Office Address: 87 King William St, Fitzroy 3065, Victoria.

Telephone: (03) 419 9877. (two lines).

Postal Address: PO Box 21, Carlton South 3053, Victoria.

The Co-operator will be accepting paid display advertising in future issues. Advertisers should contact Ken Allison on (03) 419 9877.

ISSN 0814-1037

Federation Faces Change

The Co-operative Federation Of Victoria (CFV) has appointed Tony Miller as its new executive officer.

This follows Bill Rawlinson's retirement from the position earlier this year.

Miller brings to the position many years' experience working in co-operatives, in particular as a project officer with the Victorian Credit Co-operative Association.

His appointment comes at a time when the CFV is re-examining its role as an umbrella body for the co-operative movement in Victoria.

"We have gone through a review of the federation and have attempted to take into account information made available through the MACC committee on worker co-operatives as well as developments in equity housing co-operatives", said Miller.

The CFV was particularly interested in achieving on-going discussion with the various aspects of the co-operative movement, he said.

"We want to ensure there is no loss of contact between the co-operative movement and the newly developing worker co-operatives."

"We do believe that each sector ultimately needs its own association. But if there is a

need for a separate worker co-op association, then it must come from the grass roots. The potential danger is a duplication of efforts by the various associations not keeping in touch with each other. It would be a lot easier being under a very loose umbrella, not in terms of control but in terms of assistance", he said.

With the Co-operative Development Program, Miller expressed doubts as to its long term achievements.

"I would have liked to have seen a lot more success. After five years, there remains a degree of instability. This may be because there isn't a unity of development. The CDP has concentrated on worker co-operatives, whereas the agricultural area needs development and training."

Miller also criticised government funding in the co-operative movement.

"With government funding, there is a great deal of uncertainty. Will the programs be cut for political reasons? Personally, I would like to see established a co-operative development foundation which administered certain forms of



funding to co-operatives. The co-operative movement should have control over its own resources."

"If the government was interested in continuing funding the co-operative movement, they could put their funds into the federation. A foundation could also attract development money."

"There are lessons to be learnt on both sides. To be quite honest, half of my board wouldn't know what worker co-operatives were on about. But then we've never been asked", said Miller.

COSHG In Crisis

The collective of Self Help Groups (COSHG), which was facing its worst financial crisis since it began in 1977, has received a reprieve.

The collective, which lobbies on behalf of self help groups throughout Victoria, was considering ceasing operations prior to receiving an emergency grant from the state government to cover its deficit.

However, COSHG still requires increased funding for the coming year, according to community education worker, Judy Spokes.

Expected income was not coming from the trusts which have traditionally funded COSHG, she said. The Department of Community Services will provide funding in the coming financial year, but this will only be sufficient to employ one and a quarter workers.

However COSHG was not alone in facing financial

difficulties. Many other self help and community action groups were facing similar problems, said Ms Spokes.

"COSHG does not wish to see groups set against each other in obtaining funding. This has happened in the past," she said.

"We believe that it is important for the Department of Community Services to adequately fund both COSHG and self help groups."

A meeting to discuss the funding situation for self help groups will be held on 15 June at 2pm at COSHG.

PBS To Make Bigger Waves

One of Melbourne's most popular music broadcasters, 3PBS, based in St Kilda, will soon be expanding its broadcasting service.

The station, along with other public broadcasters in Melbourne, will be shifting its present city-based transmitter to a common transmitter site in Mt Dandenong.

This will mean some exciting developments for the station, according to station manager, Ian Stanistreet.

"We'll rid ourselves of interference problems and broaden our services. We'll be



Ian Stanistreet, station manager

able to extend our broadcast hours and for the first time compete with other stations on an equal basis," he said.

"While the station has been quite successful despite its handicaps it will then come into its own for the first time."

At present 3PBS commences transmission from 4.30pm weekdays and 24 hours over the weekend. Together with increased transmission hours, the station will increase its power from 200 to 10,000 watts.

Financial assistance from the Co-operative Development Program within the Ministry of Employment and Industrial Affairs will make the changeover possible.

New Fiction

One of the more creative publishing ventures in 1985 will be a collection of short stories by Hodja Publishing Co-operative. The stories, intended for adolescents, will cover a wide range of issues. Gays, women and prisoners will be represented in an anthology which co-editor Frank Wilmot believes will break new ground in Australian publishing.

An aim of the project was to gather three or four accepted writers and include work from others lacking exposure.

"There's an absence of good anthologies for adolescents. This anthology will contain tight, honest writing with a strong impact on kids. They get little exposure to alternative ideas", he said.

Wilmot, who's first novel, *Breaking Up* will be screened as a telemovie by the ABC in September, said many of the stories related similar problems, despite their varied backgrounds.

Common Themes

"Overall, the common theme of the stories is the positive aspect

of the human spirit."

"There is a particular story by prisoner Philip Hewitt which I think is the best writing on correctional institutions since the book *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*", said Wilmot.

"In his stories, Hewitt describes his life as a truant, then later as a petty thief which led him into institutions."

With the working title, *The Plough Project*, the anthology is due to be published by Hodja later in the year.

Co-editing the book with Wilmot is Robyn Jackson, who brings to the project particular expertise as a teacher of English as a second language at Brunswick Technical School.



Frank Wilmot and Robyn Jackson

THE CO-OPERATOR

Managing in Manhattan



New York's economy increasingly resembles that of a Third World country, according to Rick Surpin, director of the Centre for Community Economic Development (CCED) in New York.

Over the past few years, the Centre has increasingly concentrated on worker co-operatives as a solution to the city's crippling unemployment.

Much community-based effort has to date been in the field of property development. Surpin argues that while this may be a worthwhile community strategy, it has contributed little to the creation of well paid and stable jobs with good working conditions.

The centre was established in 1982 to create satisfactory employment for poor or working class people with a significant degree of local control over jobs and capital generation.

Surpin, in a recent article, argues that many of the voluntary bodies which have developed enterprises both for the purpose of job creation and/or to obtain additional income for their organisations have had only limited success: jobs created are few, poor in quality, and there is a time lag before profits, if any, are realised.

Moreover, the effort often diverts the parent organisation away from its original purpose.

As an alternative, CCED helps to start new worker cooperatives, or to help workers take over existing businesses, provided the business is still profitable and the workforce is drawn from a poor neighbourhood. The help offered includes business planning and financial packaging, worker and manager recruitment, training and management consultancy.

CCED assists a variety of cooperatives. On Time Carpentry

Inc and Cooperative Home Care Associates Inc which started in

October 1984 to provide services under contract to health care institutions in the Bronx are two examples. Developed in collaboration with the Service Employee International Union, the latter has 60 members to begin with and it is planned to increase the membership to 200 by the fourth year of operation.

One Time Carpentry Inc's ten worker-members are all Latino or black and began operations in March 1984. Each member-worker pays an initial membership fee of \$100 and has to invest an additional \$1500 over three years through payroll deductions.

In Cooperative Care the initial fee is \$50, with an additional investment of \$700 over three years. When the enterprises obtain profits they will be distributed to members in proportion to the number of hours each has worked.

Other projects which CCED is helping include a word processing company and the conversion of a recycling company to cooperative ownership.

International Co-Operation

The Institute for International Social Co-operation (ICOS) is a newly created association in France which aims to promote international exchanges and co-operation in the field of co-operatives (especially worker co-operatives) and trade unions.

Based in Paris, it sees its task as being part of the French government's efforts to increase cultural co-operation in the social field.

In its first year of activity (under a highly prestigious board of

senior civil servants, officers of various co-operative movements as well as organizations and people associated with voluntary and social security organizations), it has concentrated its efforts on building up contacts between France, Spain and Portugal.

A series of visits and meetings have been arranged in all three countries involving representatives of the worker co-operative movements, trade unions and related government departments.



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Les Smith, organiser with eastern region food co-operative

Some Food For Thought

Traditionally and inherently traders and consumers are in a position of conflict — they do not share common interest. Traders provide goods and services in return for income in order to generate profits. Whereas consumers desire to purchase goods and services of the best quality for the cheapest prices.

Consumer co-operatives have a role to play in terms of working towards correcting the imbalance of power between trader and consumer, that is, where the trader and consumer become one and the same. Only in this way can there be a common interest between trader and consumer.

Trading co-operatives are accountable to their membership, who are the consumers of their goods and services. Therefore, the responsibility is related to quality and economy of goods and services. On the other hand, private enterprise businesses are accountable to the owners of capital who may not necessarily be consumers. Therefore, the responsibility is to provide a return on investment (profit).

Consumer co-operatives empower the consumer through the exercise of **consumer democracy** providing an opportunity for consumers to effect greater control over their access to goods and services. For food co-operatives, this means greater control over price, quality, and shopping environment.

Empowering people presupposes that those who are currently powerless and

relatively resourceless in general or specific areas of their lives will be able to gain the skills, knowledge and resources to be able to successfully control these aspects of their lives.

Control over the structures and institutions which affect people's lives have increasingly moved from the hands of individuals and communities into the ambit of bureaucracies and corporations. This has often created a win/lose situation — as professionals, bureaucracies and corporations take more control over facets of people's lives, then the individual must lose that amount of control over their own lives.

Of the 44 co-operatives included in the study conducted by the Victorian Co-operative Study Group, *Food Co-operatives in Victoria* (1984), 79% of workers contribute their labour on an unpaid basis.

Therefore the issue of participation and volunteer labour is of particular importance for the food co-operative movement.

The case for participation is two-fold. Firstly, for many of the emerging co-operatives and small co-operatives it is not financially possible to pay wages. Members of these co-

operatives choose to participate voluntarily and share the responsibilities, thereby ensuring the benefit gained from lower prices. Such participation ensures the co-operative's existence and growth, sometimes with the hope that more members may benefit and eventually support paid work.

On the other hand, in many food co-operatives members choose to retain a high voluntarily participation rate regardless of financial considerations. Member participation in all aspects of the food co-operative, from decision making to sweeping floors, is seen as a vital element of the nature of the co-operative. These members believe that the spirit of working co-operatively is as important as buying goods. Furthermore, participation is seen as a way each member can exercise their democratic control.

For many food co-operatives there is a 'social capital' to be gained from member participation, as important to many co-operatives as is its financial capital. It is through participation that a sense of control is realised which is aimed at strengthening the base of the co-operative and empowering the individual.

There are many reasons why people become members of food co-operatives. Some wish to buy cheaper food, others seek the spirit of community in working together. Others prefer the productive form of the activity, while for some the food co-operative simply breaks their isolation. Some people join so they may regain control over a small proportion of their lives.

Richard Titmuss (1970) argues that people volunteer their time and energy as an expression of a "gift of relationship" — a case of social exchange rather than commercial exchange as the basis for human relationships.

Involvement in co-operative ventures may provide satisfaction of personal needs and development, the opportunity to learn new skills, use old skills, make new friends and enjoy mutual sociability.

Many groups addressed the **co-operative** nature of their

activities:

- * encourage people to participate in collective activity
- * enable people to be involved in a co-operative structure
- * explore working co-operatively to provide basic foodstuffs
- * alternative structure for community living

Although different groups lay greater emphasis on some of these objectives than others, a strong emphasis on cheap food, assistance to low income people and a desire for nutritional foods was apparent throughout the responses.

Reasons for member participation in food co-operatives are reflected by the objectives outlined in the survey responses. These responses illustrate a variety of ideals and objectives encompassing practical, social, educational and political notions, and co-operative ideals.

The **practical** aims are stated as:

- * to provide food as cheaply as possible
- * to enable the purchase of food locally
- * to provide food free of wasteful packaging
- * to provide food of quality — unrefined, minimally processed, fresh, free of chemicals, nutritional
- * to enable bulk purchasing of food.

Social reasons include:

- * to encourage people to participate in collective activity — trust, sharing
- * a social activity for isolated families and individuals
- * to provide support to people in difficulties using 'self help' principles
- * to encourage local co-operation and friendship
- * to put fun and friendship back into shopping
- * to encourage community spirit and activity

Educationally orientated goals include:

- * to provide opportunities for skills development and exchange
- * to encourage unemployed people to improve their skills and self-confidence
- * to encourage discussion and thought about food — nutrition, processing, effective buying

* to introduce healthy foods into healthy diets through budget cooking classes

* to encourage and support an awareness of a healthier lifestyle
Some **political** objectives encompass:

- * the control over one's own food buying and budgeting
- * lack of faith in present systems of distribution and marketing of foods
- * to operate on a non-profit basis
- * lobbying for increased understanding and assistance for people on low incomes
- * to provide service to disadvantaged people.



David Morton

Talking Of Food

In recent years there has been a growth of food co-operatives both in Melbourne and throughout Victoria. The following interviews, conducted by Trish Luker from the Victorian Food Co-operative Study Group (VFCSG), highlight the diversity of food co-ops in Victoria — their motives, size, modes of operating, types of food sold, problems, staffing arrangements and ideas for the future.

The extent of support for the proposed food co-operative warehouse is evident and some of the resource needs of food co-operatives are outlined. Co-operatives also discuss how they would use state funding if it were available. The VFCSG receives enquiries daily from people interested in establishing food co-operatives.

There are at present about 50 food co-operatives throughout Victoria.

North Melbourne Food Shop was set up in March 1984. It carries a mixed grocery stock, has 135 members and opens 10-5pm, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Membership is only \$2 per year. The shop is situated in a community flat on a high rise estate. Margaret Crosby, co-op treasurer, was interviewed.

Why was a food co-op set up on the North Melbourne Estate?

A lot of work went into setting up in 1984 because a number of people in the flats felt that there weren't any supermarkets in the area selling good quality food at low prices. The closest is in either Moonee Ponds or Footscray and it's necessary to have your own transport or to use public transport. We also felt that we might be able to force down the prices in these supermarkets. That hasn't happened yet — we simply can't stock the variety and amount of goods necessary.

Has it been a success?

It started off very successfully actually. We were quite surprised ourselves. In the first few weeks we gained about 100 members and had a lot of volunteers willing to come in and help. But there is a very high turnover of residents in the flats and most of those initial people either moved or got jobs and were never really replaced. At the beginning we had the assistance of a member of the North Melbourne Social Services who helped us set up and worked as a co-ordinator. She could only put in a certain amount of time and when she started to withdraw her involvement there was nobody to come in and take over.

What other problems have you incurred?

Location of the shop is a problem as it is on the second floor of one of the highrise

blocks and that makes it very difficult to attract new members from a wider area. The Tenants Council rooms are on the ground floor, having a much more accessible and communal position.

One of our main problems has been supply. We simply cannot get the big warehouses to sell to us and we can't buy from the manufacturer. We can only buy from Withers (now Campbell's) and because the warehouse is at South Melbourne we've also had a problem with transport — none of us have cars. We are such a small enterprise that we have to constantly buy and sell quickly to get money so as to buy some more. We simply can't stock up enough and that's been a really big problem.

So if you had a major supplier who was prepared to sell you stock in smaller quantities that would help the co-op survive?

Oh yes, if we had somewhere where we could go where food was reasonably cheap we'd be right.

The co-op is run entirely on voluntary labor. What's the arrangement for staffing the shop?

Well, we enlist anyone who says they'd be willing to put a bit of time into the shop. There are only a certain number of people who have remained involved for long. And in that respect there's a lack of commitment. After all, it's voluntary and generally people are not prepared or are unable to commit themselves regularly. It's not a criterion of membership that people work a certain amount of time.

What would be an ideal arrangement for your co-op in terms of paid or unpaid workers?

I believe that we need a paid worker who could come in for 15-20 hours per week and work up a roster, assign people set jobs and show them how to do those jobs — to co-ordinate. The rest of the work could then be done voluntarily.

Are members of the co-op committed to voluntary work in that way?

Well, we're used to voluntary work because everything else on the estate is done on a voluntary basis. Some get paid but it's more a token payment

than anything else. Most of us are on pensions and any money we earn is deducted from that.

What other non-financial resources do you think co-ops need?

At the moment we need a Resources Centre, to provide advice on where to get certain goods cheaply. We also need somebody who could come out and give advice on book-keeping and stock control.

There are high populations of recent Vietnamese and Turkish migrants on the estate and we need assistance with translation too.

Whole Foods Co-operative Ltd was set up in 1978 and is a busy shop in central Geelong with 1000 household members. The co-op sells bulk natural foods. Hours are 9.00-5.30pm Monday to Thursday, 9.00-7.00pm Friday and 9.00-12.30 Saturday. It was registered as a co-operative in November 1982. Jan Farnan, chairperson of the Board of Directors was interviewed.



Kate Cogan and Rebecca

How was Wholefoods Geelong established?

Four people started the store in 1978 along the lines of the Melbourne Uni Food Co-op. Each person put in about \$1000 and they bought the stock and then set up a little shop.

The aims were to sell good, natural, basic foodstuffs at a cheap price, without the profit motive and with minimal handling; to sell food without any excess packaging (from a conservation concern); to promote awareness of food

production (methods, politics and availability) and of wholesome diet requirements (basic good health) and to encourage local production of organic and biodynamic produce for local consumption. The co-op grew fairly rapidly.

You've been operating seven years now. Have these original aims changed in any way?

No, they are still really central, although they've been the cause of dispute at different times, particularly between the staff and directors. This conflict surrounds the emphasis on these aims as opposed to convenience for the shoppers.

Why did the original four people choose to set up as a co-op rather than as a business?

Political and social motives of social concern and responsibility. The co-op was seen as a service to our community and a way of improving the quality of life in Geelong. Eventually three people left, recouping their original investment. The last handed it over to a larger group

of people who became involved, and who then set up informal democratic structure to run the co-op. So we were running as a co-op before we actually applied to register. In fact, it has always been a bone of contention as to whether we needed to register or not.

What major problems have you encountered in the time you've been operating?

We began on a voluntary basis but lacked the organisation to co-ordinate that successfully. When it became financially

possible, we employed a manager. At the time a lot of people were disappointed with that decision, concerned that it might create divisions within the shop, and many didn't come back or shop in the store again.

There has also been a lack of skills in the group in regard to managing, planning and organisation — the mechanics of running shops really.

Implementing the packaging policy is another problem. There seems to be a lack of commitment on the part of staff to minimal packaging and bulk buying and it's argued about quite heatedly.

Another problem is one of supply — getting the goods from reliable wholesalers as cheap as possible. Because we have a lack of storage space we don't have the buying power we'd like. So we'd really like a larger secure building.

What are the staff arrangements at Wholefoods/

The shop was originally run by volunteers, with a roster. We had trouble with the Health Department, particularly regarding cleanliness, but when we employed a paid manager, the situation improved greatly. Eventually the volunteer labor roster ran down and more people were employed. So now we have three full-time, two part-time, one slow worker and three regular volunteers.

What's the working relationship between unpaid volunteers and paid workers?

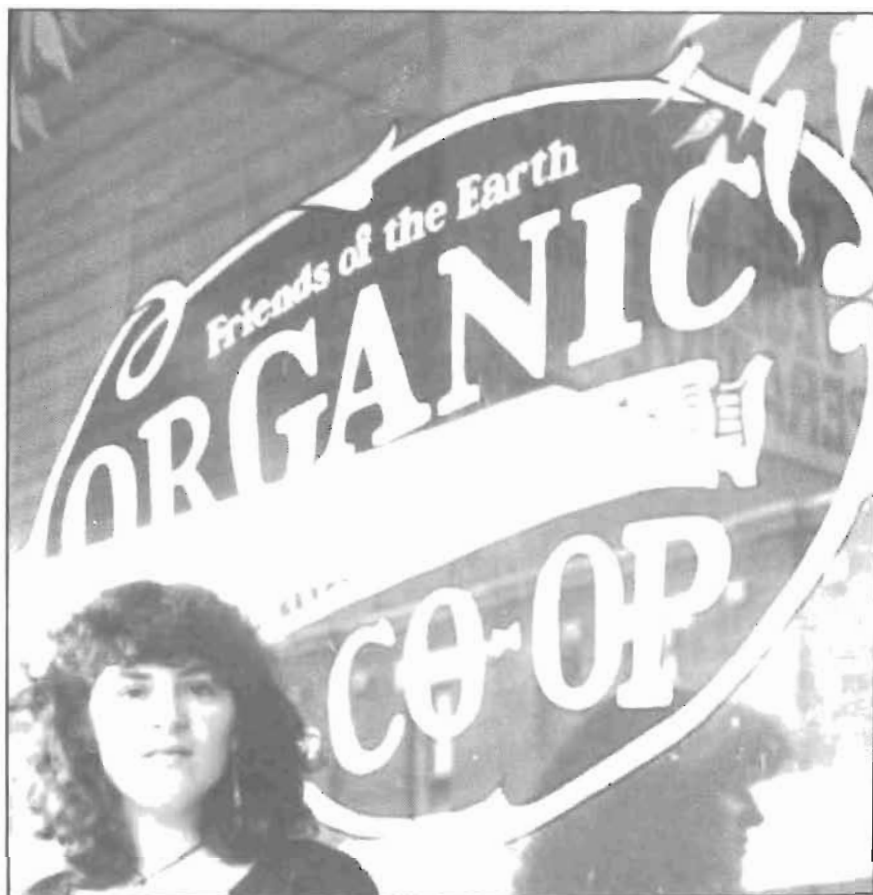
Initially when the first paid worker arrived on the scene there were some problems, but at the moment there are no difficulties or tensions.

Is the job responsibility different for volunteers as to paid employees or would volunteers do work that paid workers do?

We don't use any skilled volunteer workers although we've had offers of assistance from journalists for newsletters and from advertising people which we haven't followed up.

Wholefoods Geelong currently receives funding from the Co-operative Development Program. At what stage of financial viability are you now?

We're more or less a going



Claire Sarandis

concern. Our original funding about two years ago was to buy capital equipment — a truck and a coolroom particularly. I think we received about \$17,500. Of that, \$2,500 was a direct grant.

Above all at this stage we need a building of adequate size with secure tenure. We've outgrown the building we are in. If the government was to purchase a building and lease it to us at a reasonable rental that would be ideal.

Does your co-op require resources other than financial ones?

We need assistance in buying power to get lower prices. It's very difficult, even though we are non-profit, to compete with supermarkets who have much more buying power and storage than we've got. We're paying high wholesale prices and that makes it difficult to run efficiently and economically while still providing cheap prices.

We also lack certain skills, particularly forward financial planning and personnel management. We've just surveyed the staff for educational purposes and

found that they needed support in various areas, noticeably financial management, book-keeping, nutrition, signwriting and special diets.

Alamein Food Co-op is situated in a housing estate and operates from a room in a community flat. There are 40 to 45 families which buy from the co-op, and there is no formal membership. It was set up in 1976 and stocks packaged groceries — 'basic needs'. It opens in conjunction with other activities in the flat and also when requested. Yvonne McCamley, Mary O'Keefe and Jan Rybinski were interviewed.

Could you begin by explaining why the co-op was set up?

In this area there are a number of Housing Commission flats where people are living on low incomes — particularly single parents and elderly people. Most of them were shopping at the corner shop and ticking it up on credit to tide them over from their fortnightly pension. Originally, the idea was that there would be an order system where people could order

goods on a weekly basis and pay for them when they were able to. From that grew the idea of a food co-op.

How has that initial direction changed in the time you've been operating?

Today we have a shop — like a little old fashioned grocer's shop — and people can come in and buy goods at will. We stock tinned food and packet food as well as dairy produce (no milk of course) and occasionally we are able to get frozen meat. We also have chicken and sausages from the local butcher.

What sort of problems have you incurred in the nine years you've been operating?

Lack of volunteers has been a big problem and people's unwillingness to do the job properly, but we've generally struggled along.

You've persevered for a long time, so it seems people really wanted the co-op to keep going.

At first there was one person who was here everyday and who did everything. She left about 18 months ago and we employed a co-ordinator for three months to attempt to stimulate volunteer involvement. But that didn't happen and she was left to do the lot. When she left we closed for a month and there was an overwhelming response from people who wanted it open — elderly people especially. We called a meeting of all the people in the area and said, "okay, it's your co-op, open it, but you've got to run it."

Four people stepped forward at that meeting as volunteers, one of whom completely re-organised the books. One of the problems was that money went missing or stock went missing and many people feared that they would be blamed individually. So now we have a proper book-keeping system and people are much happier.

Twelve months ago I might have had doubts about whether the co-op should continue because of the state of flux it was in. Now I think it is a very necessary thing for the area and it certainly helps to put money back into the pockets of the people who don't necessarily have enough to eat from week to week.



Do you have problems with supply?

Yes, we've had a lot of problems with supply — especially with regard to transport. At this stage one person is reimbursed with petrol money to do our shopping once a week. But it would be much easier if I could ring the order through and have it all delivered.

What's the situation with workers and volunteers in the co-op?

The shop is staffed by three volunteers. We open every day for at least one hour and at other times when requested. We open in conjunction with the activities in the community flat where the co-op is located. It's pretty flexible.

You don't run on a membership basis?

No. We do have a system called the 'never, never' where people can put their goods on an account and pay when their cheque comes in.

If direct government grants were available to food co-ops, would your co-op be interested in receiving these funds? How would you use them?

We need larger premises and money to pay the rent, probably about \$150.00 a week. We are currently operating out of a Housing Ministry flat in a room of about nine by six feet. If we were larger we would be also need wages for a co-ordinator and we'd probably return to a membership basis. This would all have to be discussed and worked through again.

What other assistance do you need?

Our needs are quite particular as we deal with fruit and vegetables — things like the equipment and the building were problems at first. We had to install a coolroom and that involved an enormous amount of work, physical work which we couldn't possibly have done without the support of large numbers of volunteers with expertise.

Sharing information and ideas by contact with other food co-ops is very important. We need information on suppliers, especially in our immediate area. And of course if we had one central point where we could buy our goods, a warehouse, that would be terrific. Delivery is a real problem too.

Denise Chevalier, one of four co-ordinators at the Organic Fruit and Vegetable Co-op was interviewed. The co-op opened in 1983 with a full range of organic and conventionally grown fruit and vegetables. It also stocks some soya products and fruit juices. Hours are 12.00-6.00pm Monday to Thursday, 11.00-6.00pm Friday and 10.00-1.00pm Saturday. The co-op has 800 household members and is situated just out of the main shopping area in Collingwood.

What was the political motivation for setting up the food co-op?

Originally it was to be part of a larger project to research both a nutrition policy for Victoria and to set up an Organic Fruit and Vegetable Co-op.

We want to encourage the growing of produce organically and aim to sell it at a reasonable price. We see a co-operative structure as a way of providing this produce for the benefit of members rather than for any individual's personal profit.

Also, as a practical expression of our politics, doing something which is breaking down and away from hierarchal structures and exploring alternative ways of operating a business.

You've been going for a couple of years now. Has that initial

direction changed in any way?

The initial EIP funding was for six months and we found the task of both writing the nutrition policy and setting up the co-op too much in such a short time. Although the policy was seen as useful and worthwhile, it was dropped. We haven't taken it on again since, although we're still interested in ideas of nutrition and of promoting it in a general sense.

Have you incurred any major problems in operating?

We've had other problems, especially financial ones initially. We were only funded for six months and that's not long enough to set up and build up a business to self-sufficiency. We were really worried at the end of that time that we would have to close, but we did manage to get a few smaller government grants after that.

We made a lot of noise about not being refunded, because we were under the impression we would be funded by the CDP after the initial six months. It took some time before we were told we weren't going to be. It was only because a lot of people put in hard work that we managed to hang on over that critical time and now we're almost at the stage that we can survive independently.

Is supply a problem in the organic fruit and vegetable area?

In organic lines, yes. There are never enough organic growers and we are always looking for new contacts and new growers. The demand far exceeds the supply.

The Organic Fruit and Vegetable Co-Op has a shop front and paid workers. What's the arrangement between volunteers and paid workers?

We have four paid part-time workers, one goes to market two days a week and also works in the shop one day per week. Two others work three days and one four days. We see ourselves as organisers rather than being responsible for all the work. We work with a lot of volunteers, some of whom regularly go to market with the buyer or work in the shop, especially on the cash

register, or in other areas. We would like volunteers to work in other areas too — perhaps book-keeping.

Does the co-op have a commitment to that voluntary work or would they see the ideal situation as being different to that?

Realistically, we need paid co-ordinators with a good number of regular volunteers.

Is there uniformity in this belief among the members?

No, volunteers that come to work have different ideas about what their role should be. Some people want something to do, to feel they're doing something useful. Others are willing to take on more commitment. It's something we need to talk about more, because it isn't simple. Some of the jobs that I'm doing now could quite easily be done by a regular volunteer. I would like to see more volunteers working in the co-op because that represents to me interest and participation. We have 1000 people who have joined at one stage or another and probably about 600 are current members, and we have maybe 20 regular volunteers.

I think it would be a healthier sign if more people were willing to work in the co-op.

If direct funds were available to co-ops, how would Organics use these funds?

There are a few areas. We need funds to make improvements to the shop — especially better shelving which we can't afford at the moment. We'd like to take a more political direction too — to research chemical use in fruit and vegies and place the information in a form which is accessible. We'd like to provide general education about organic produce; why it's important and what the difference is. We'd also like to have general information about nutrition.

In this area we'd like to work with the community health centres. We talked about this last year and applied to the government for funding. Then there was a ban placed on funding co-ops and that's the last we've heard of it.

Do you see it as necessary to provide other non-financial resources to food co-ops and in what areas do you need assistance?

We would need advice about financial management and on legal matters. For some time we have been talking about becoming a registered co-operative but we keep putting it off because it seems to be too daunting, too complicated and not all that pressing.

We also need advice on promotion of our co-op. We still do need to sell more to make ourselves a long term financial proposition. We're not sure what the most effective and cost efficient method of promoting is.

Les Smith of Eastern Region Food Co-operative was interviewed. This co-op bulk buys wholefoods and every two months organises a sorting and distribution day in a local community house. Twenty households participate, and there is a \$20 joining fee and \$5.00 subscription. The co-op has been operating since 1976.

What was the original motivation for setting up the food co-op?

It emerged from the Outer Eastern Regional Council for Social Development back in the Whitlam days.

That region was extremely active. They set up an enormous number of committees and organisations and right at the very end somebody thought it would be a good idea to try and set up a food co-op. Primarily, we wanted to buy food without as much packaging, cheaper and of good quality.

Have the co-op's aims changed in any way in the last nine years?

Not really, although we haven't been able to follow them entirely because of the problems we've experienced with suppliers. We decided at that original meeting to only purchase goods that we could sell at 10% less than supermarket prices. Although that hasn't always been possible, we've continued to seek out more sources of supply in the hope that we can get back to that.



Do you use a number of suppliers?

Yes. We purchase the bulk of our goods from the Friends of the Earth (FOE) Co-operative and buy direct from the same wholesaler as they use for dried foods. We also have a honey supplier, a chicken supplier and an egg supplier.

Are you happy using FOE as a supplier?

Not altogether, because we're paying the traditional markup. On the other hand, we will probably continue with them where we only want small quantities. Their peanut butter and muesli are very popular and we can't get them anywhere else. If we could buy the main, bulk items direct from a wholesaler, it would be cheaper.

Have you encountered any other problems?

Not really. We've had quite a turnover of members, and I think there has been a problem with the lack of communication. New members simply assumed that the old members did the work and the old members hadn't bothered to explain that volunteers were needed. We did some reorganisation to address the problem at the beginning of this year, when we introduced a subscription and built up a roster. This is now completely filled.

Could you clarify how you organise the various tasks that need to be done?

With buying, it tends to be a regular arrangement with an individual who can conveniently buy from a particular place. We tend to rotate the other jobs. We have a roster for the collection of money; other people help clear up afterwards and organise getting food back for storage. The treasurer's position is permanent.

Your co-op operates on a pre-order basis. What happens if anything is left over?

It gets stored at somebody's house. Some things are not suitable for storage of for example dried fruit. But most of the things we have are not perishable. We did once try organically grown fruit and vegetables but it was not something we could order in advance because we didn't know what was available and we ended up having a lot left over. We didn't do it again. It's not suitable to a two monthly operation.

Are there plans to change your structure in any way?

Not really. We have changed it minimally in that we have become more structured and now have a convenor and treasurer and a social secretary. The social secretary organises

the Christmas party. We usually have time only for a brief chat on Saturday afternoons when the food is sorted out and distributed. So it's nice to meet each other more socially. We also have a newsletter.

How often do you produce the newsletter?

Every two months. The order form is included in the newsletter and we like to get the order back two weeks before pickup to make sure everyone has time to do their buying.

Could your co-op use direct government funding if it was made available?

It's a bit difficult to answer really. We haven't perceived any need for funding at the moment because we're organised on the presumption that it's not available. There are different ways we could operate if we did get government funding.

One of the problems with only meeting every two months is that people have to buy enough food to last that time. If you're not very well off financially, that can be difficult.

We have stated that payment can be made in instalments, although we are unable to offer much assistance. Maybe funding could help in tiding over these periods. At the moment, we have a \$20.00 joining fee to cover stock on hand and we have to bank the payments first thing on Monday or we go broke.

I think we could operate more frequently perhaps with government funding. We had hoped that when we moved into the community house it would be possible to store food there, in which case people could come along perhaps once a week and buy what we had left over. Unfortunately, that's not possible.

Apart from financial resources, are there any other resources that your co-op would like access to?

At the moment, we need sources of supply. If the warehouse is opened, that, we hope, will be our source of supply. Beyond that, not really. General information about marketing would be useful.

Food Warehouse?

The Victorian Food Co-operative Study Group (VFCSG) was originally funded by the Ministry of Employment and Training (MEAT) in February 1984, after initiatives taken by the Food Co-operative Support Group. To date, the group has produced a report on Victorian food co-operatives, designed a business plan for a food warehouse and developed the necessary organisations to facilitate the growth of food co-operatives.

The Study Group's research had indicated that food co-ops have two main areas of need. One involved the actual purchase of food stuffs. The Study Group has proposed the establishment of a central warehouse to address this need. The other general area is education and training, indicating the need for a Resource Centre.

Prior to the State elections in March 1985, Premier Cain outlined the government's commitment to the establishment of both a 'bulk buying warehouse and development centre' for co-ops as part of the Anti-Poverty Strategy:

"We will set up a co-operative warehouse and development centre. This will in effect be a 'master co-operative', serving existing and developing co-operatives.

It will provide practical training in financial management, buying and marketing; and the centre's warehouse will be able to bulk buy on behalf of all participatory co-operatives, and reduce the prices that each charges its members." (Victoria: The Next Four Years, background notes to the Premier's 1985 Campaign Speech.)

However, responsibility for these two initiatives was not

allocated to a particular Ministry. Inter-departmental discussions between the Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs, Consumer Affairs and the Department of Community Services are currently under way to determine where food co-ops will be positioned. Until this is clarified, the future of the warehouse, which has been already approved by the Funding Committee of the Co-operative Development Program, and the Resource Centre is uncertain.

Funding for the Study Group expired in April 1985. Extensive consultation with the Department and lobbying from food co-operatives resulted in the VFCSG securing a further six months funding to pilot the Resource Centre. It was considered by the Department premature to establish a long-term service without further research.

The Pilot Project will target a small number of food co-operatives, specifically low-income and migrant groups, and work with them in identifying and addressing their particular educational and training needs.

This may be in the form of consultants (eg. accountants); seminar discussions (eg. member participation); formal classes (eg. book keeping); resource material (eg. information sheets, kits or video).

Participation in the Ministerial Committee on Co-operation (MACC) consultation has been part of the VFCSG's brief and will remain so. We will also continue to fight for State government support to food co-ops.

Focus upon low-income group food co-ops is seen as an important aspect of the Study Group's project. The Warehouse, in incorporating both large and small co-ops, enables all co-ops, especially the smaller and poorly resourced ones, to benefit from economies of scale in purchasing. It is considered important to bring co-ops from all sectors together and facilitate the development of each in this manner.

Co-operative Suppliers

Food Co-operatives in Victoria currently purchase their food stuffs from a large number of different suppliers.

The following list outlines some of these and is offered as a guide only. Further information can be obtained from the VFCSG.

NSM ph380-8789: dried fruits, nuts, seeds, grains, beans and sugar.

Ceres Foods ph579-3422: flour, grains, beans, peas, pasta, seeds, herbs, spices, herb teas and macrobiotic supplies.

Renshaw Foods ph762-7544: dried fruits, seeds, herbs, spices, grains, jams, spreads, cereals and beans.

Al-Wadi and J. Roastery ph447-131: nuts.

Spaghetti Conga Amalgamated ph489-1699: pasta.

Campbells Cash 'N Carry ph544-1433: sugar, canned foods, confectionary, sauces, dried fruit, frozen foods, eggs, pharmaceuticals, pet food, cheese, kitchen aids and rice.

Sanitarium ph549-1171: jams, spreads and breakfast cereals.

Gayes Honey House ph459-9843: honey.

Continental Flour Mills ph401-1304: Flours, grains.

Ballantyne ph690-1766: flour, yoghurt, confectionary and coffee.

Jay Home Care ph495-6333: kitchen aids.

Arnotts ph285-1214: biscuits.

John Lewis ph690-1700: small goods, chicken loaf and hamburgers.

Cambridge Chickens ph241-5604: frozen chickens.

S&P Dairy ph528-1544: eggs, cheese, vinegar and margarine.

Jalna ph480-6899: yoghurt and other dairy products.

Australian Soap Company ph221-5533: soap and detergents.

The Co-Operator's How, What And Where Funding Guide

A step-by-step guide for start-up co-operatives seeking funding from The Co-Operative Development Program (CDP), Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs.

1. Obtain co-operatives publications — from the Co-operative Development Program Unit of the Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs. Telephone (03) 658 6444.
2. Attend the 'Introducing Worker Co-operatives' Workshop, Preston College of TAFE. Telephone (03) 480 5166 for time and place. Advertised in *The Age* on Saturday prior to workshop.
3. Apply for Co-operative Intenders' Course at Preston College of TAFE — contact CDP Unit.
4. Skill Audit — contact CDP Unit.
5. Attend Intenders Course.
6. Group decided whether it wishes to establish as a co-operative.
7. Make application to the CDP Funding Committee for participation in New Enterprise Course.
8. Funding Committee makes recommendation to Minister. Minister advises group of his decision.
9. Co-operative New Enterprise Course, Preston College of TAFE, three months. Learn how to develop an Enterprise Plan, do the research and write it.
10. Take your Enterprise Plan to three Sounding Board meetings to comment and advice.
11. Finalise your Enterprise Plan.
12. Lodge the Enterprise Plan with the CDP Unit.
13. CDP seeks assessments of the plan — from the Sounding Board, Preston College of TAFE and other assessors (as appropriate). Your group gets a copy of each of these documents before the Funding Committee meets.

14. CDP Funding Committee study your Enterprise Plan and the assessments, meet with you and make recommendation to the Minister.

15. Minister advises you of decision re. grant and/or loan.

16. Group decides whether to accept the conditions of the Funding Agreement.

17. Co-operative registers and makes preparations to open business.

18. Co-operative business opens, once a suitable location is found. It generally takes a year to move from Step 1 to this point.

19. Co-operative Counselling Service available to assist the co-op.

20. Education and Training Plan used to continue development of the co-op.

21. Quarterly meetings of the co-operative review progress.

22. Co-operative revises Business Plan, at least annually.

23. Co-operative may seek refunding for a further two years. Applications are considered as per steps 12 to 16.

NB: These steps are consecutive. Groups are not able to enter the program at, for example, step 9 or step 14. The system is designed to ensure that co-operatives are established after full consideration of issues of commitment and economic viability.

A separate process is being created for Conversion Co-operatives.

What's It All Mean?

Education and Training Plan — a document developed by the co-operative members. It details knowledge and skill needs of the co-operative, and how these will be attained.

Enterprise Plan — sometimes

called the Business Plan. A detailed document developed by the co-operative members. It allows extensive prior consideration of problems and democratic participation. Its value for external assessment (eg. for funding) is secondary.

Funding Agreement — A comprehensive contract between the co-operative and Minister. It covers requirements for monthly financial monitoring, reviews, industrial democracy, audits.

Funding Committee — 5 government officers, 6 co-operators. It considers proposals for CDP funding and makes recommendations to the Minister.

Quarterly Review Meetings — Of the co-operative to review progress and plans. More 'global' than meetings to determine routine operations of the co-operative.

Skill Audit — A new step. It seeks to establish in advance whether workers do have the skills needed by the co-operative. Co-ops have had problems of under-skilled staff.

Sounding Board — A panel of business and co-operator 'experts' who comment on your draft and final Enterprise Plan, and discuss it with you.

Language

Diverse community languages may be used within the CDP. Courses have already been conducted in Arabic and Turkish. Please let us know your requirements.

Hardly A Snail's Pace

THIS year has seen Sugar and Snails Co-operative develop into a full time publishing business. With this change comes a challenge to grow professionally while maintaining a collective spirit, according to sales and publicity co-ordinator, Helen Van Der Post.

A move to larger premises, a major publishing project, and a new administrator are some of the recent developments within the co-operative.

"What we need now is increased specialisation. But that doesn't mean we have to lose our democratic structure", said Van Der Post.

"We're still going through a period of adjustment. Previously we worked on a part time basis, meeting in the evenings, and only printing things when money was around."

The co-operative is currently preparing a budget for its second year of funding from the Co-operative Development Program.

Sugar and Snails have developed a reputation for publishing creative children's literature which combines entertainment with non-sexist values. Past projects include the *On The Job Series* and the *Sugar and Snails Work Series*.

"What we are aiming to look at now is material on careers in general. We want to move away from concentrating only on counter-sexist material. Career subjects can be both productive and non-sexist. And we want to broaden our expertise", said Van Der Post.

Future projects include four new titles in the work series as well as a 'social problems' project. However, new work

depended on the CDP responding favourably to the new budget application, she said.

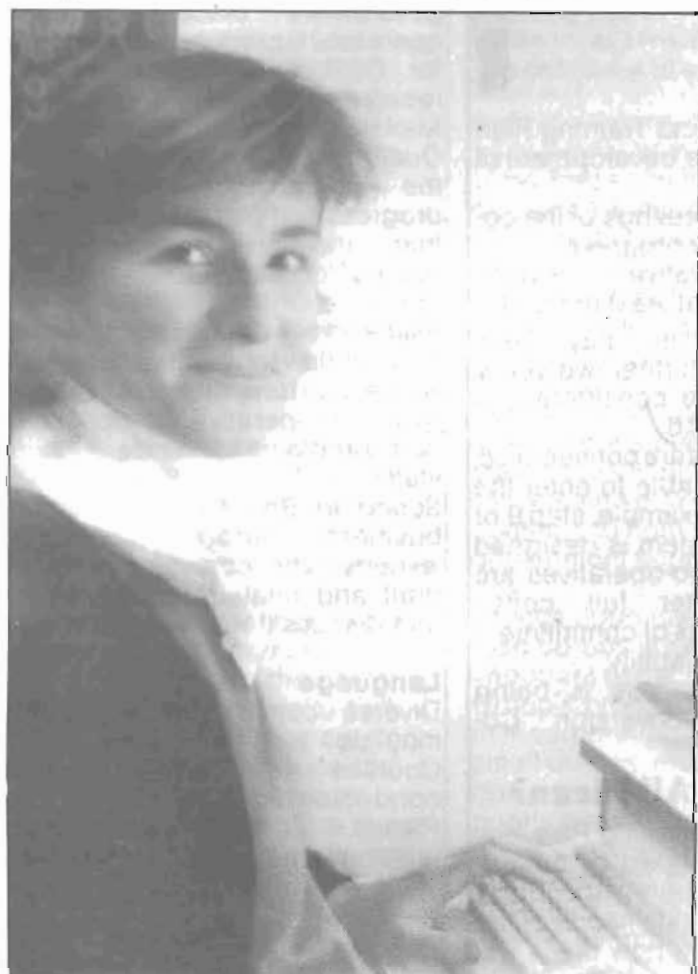
A current project nearing completion is an 'Alphabet Frieze' by Melbourne artist, Anne James.

The frieze uses the letters of the alphabet to illustrate women in a variety of professions. The illustrations range from Minnie the Mathematician to Joan the Jazz Pianist.

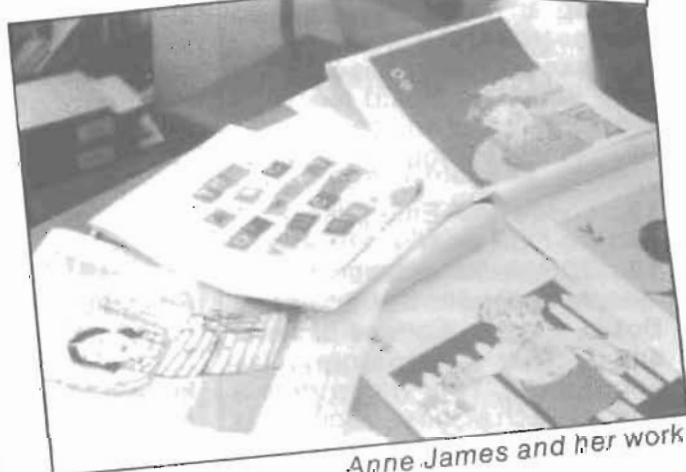
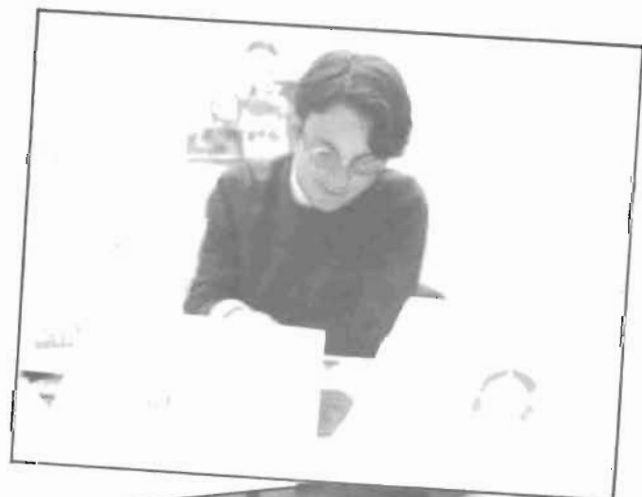
Anne James worked closely with the Sugar and Snails collective to produce the work.

"I concentrated on the visual ideas and the others discussed the content", she said.

"There is a lot of children's



Helen Van Der Post, Sales and Publicity Co-ordinator



Anne James and her work

THE CO-OPERATOR



Esther the Real Estate Agent



Binh the Butcher

literature around, but so much of it is stereotyped. An aim of the frieze was to illustrate a variety of alternative careers women can consider."

"I also wanted a balance of careers, including both the arts and the sciences."

Along with Helen Van Der Post, the other full time worker is the new administrator, Barbara Hall, who replaces Sue McVeigh. The

other worker, Clare Gately, is a part time computer operator.

The co-operative places a greater emphasis on education within their promotion than one would normally find in a publishing business. Workers have given regular talks in schools on publishing and non-sexist literature.

"It's been interesting to see how aware kids are about the

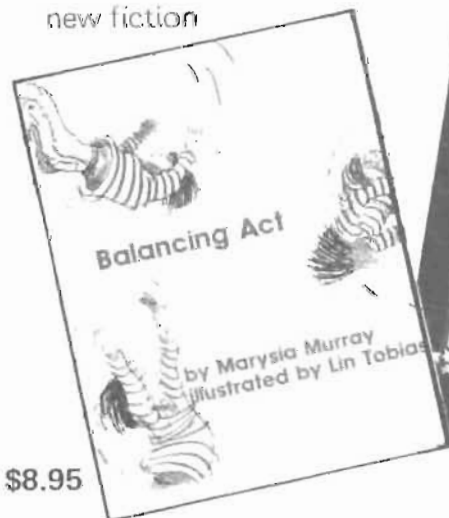
publishing business", said Van Der Post.

"We would like to see this work continue, but organise more school groups to actually visit Sugar and Snails. We would also like to do in-service work with teachers."

The Alphabet Frieze will be available soon from Sugar and Snails at their new address, 274 George St, Fitzroy.

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Worker Co-operatives — An Association

There are numerous important functions for an Association of Worker Co-operatives to perform, which will meet the direct and indirect requirements of worker co-operatives.

For the long term development of the sector, an association should perform the following:

- * development of policy on worker co-operatives
- * negotiation and liaison with government to provide input into government policy formulation on worker co-operatives and distribution of funding to intending and existing co-operatives;

- * negotiation with the trade union movement in order to develop a complementary relationship between worker co-operatives and unions, to identify areas of commonality and resolve differences. This includes assistance to individual co-operatives in discussions with their appropriate union to reduce conflict and misunderstanding;
- * research and compilation of information on co-operatives overseas and in the states, historical development, co-operative requirements and other issues affecting worker co-operatives — to inform policy development and to aid information dissemination;
- * development of an improved understanding of the financial status and potential of worker co-operatives. Assistance to individual co-operatives in attracting loans and financial support, and investigating the possibility of the establishment of a co-operative bank. The

question of co-operative taxation should also be addressed;

- * development of information and services between co-operatives and concessions and benefits for the worker co-operative sector; specifically for industry based co-operatives eg. bulk-buying and government contracts;

- * promotion of the worker co-operatives' sector through public education to develop an understanding of the existence of worker co-operatives, their approach to ownership and control, and industrial relationships within the workplace;

- * provision of resources such as computers, work processors, photocopiers etc;

- * development of appropriate education and training and support in areas of finance, marketing and publicity.

Taken from a working document by Marg Hosfal

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Worker Co-ops — A United Front?

The revival of worker co-operatives in Victoria since the late 1970s is still in its early stages. To date they are few in number. Experience overseas has indicated that expansion is largely dependent on strong, well developed infrastructural supports, according to Marg Hosfal of the Worker Co-operatives Working Party.

The working party has begun to address the basic differences which separate worker co-operatives from other co-operatives. Below, Hosfal discusses the need for an organised group of worker co-operatives to continue this work.

OPERATING as a negotiating group or united voice representing worker co-operatives would be a major and immediate function of any proposed association. There are many needs which may be met by combined action.

In Victoria, it is not possible to legally incorporate as a worker co-operative under the Cooperation Act (1981). For taxation purposes worker co-operatives are seen as private companies and do not receive the benefits other cooperatives may claim. It is extremely difficult to obtain finance from banks and other financial institutions because worker co-operatives are considered a high risk. Some trade unions may not consider worker co-operative members as legitimate workers.

If any of these difficulties are to be confronted or resolved it is necessary for worker co-operatives to define themselves as a separate sector, identify their differences and requirements and work together to gain results.

At present the Co-operative Federation of Victoria (CFV) is the only umbrella organisation which worker co-operatives can join. However like most sections of the community, the CFV lacks a thorough understanding of the nature and ways in which worker co-operatives operate. To date the large producer, trading, consumer and credit co-operatives have been the major focus of the Federation and although an Association may decide to have input on some

issues, it would seem that the most useful option from a worker co-operative view is consolidated effort on the part of a sectorial based body.

The major distinction of a worker co-operative is that its membership is made up of its workers. As such, ownership and control, including all decision making, belongs to the workers. One of the questions an Association has to answer is whether there is a role for non-worker members, and whether they should have any input into worker co-operatives. Also, should worker co-operatives that are not registered under the Cooperation Act, or in some way do not meet the criterion of a worker cooperative be involved in the Association?

Likewise, the issue of industrial standards could become a criteria for eligibility. Most Victorian Worker Co-operatives now pay award wages and aim to provide safe working conditions. Yet in order to survive, worker co-operatives may break these standards when things become difficult economically.

The question is, should industrial standards be included in a broader definition of a worker co-operative? This issue is not addressed in the international principles of co-operation. If worker co-

operatives are to be used as a model for industrial democracy, then industrial standards should not be foregone under the guise of autonomy. However, the issues involved can't easily be dismissed when you're talking about undercapitalised and underfinanced co-operatives.

The establishment of ground rules for membership is likely to lead to interesting and productive discussion on issues that at present are not clear. The process of setting up an association is in itself an important development.

Broadly, the Association will have two main roles. It will take on a development function, like the Co-operative Development Agencies of the Greater London Council, or some of the infrastructural support work that the Co-operative Development Program is doing here. But it will be different from development agencies in that the worker cooperatives will control it and set its directions. Therefore it will also act as a 'voice' that can negotiate on behalf of worker co-operatives.

The biggest problem will be having a sufficient number of employees and adequate resources to make sure we can achieve what we've set out to do. This is always a problem, particularly when you're in such early stages, and are dependent on external funding.

Finding workers with a worker cooperative background and with particular skills who are available may also cause some difficulty.

Overall though, I think the formation of the association can only be described as a positive step.

The feasibility and direction of the new association of worker cooperatives ought to be clarified in the next few months.

For further information, contact Marg Hosfal on 337 4264.

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